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Soviet Motivations for the Use of Chemical Weapons in Afghanistan and Southeast Asia

An Intelligence Assessment

Secret

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An Intelligence Assessment

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Key Judgments

*Information available
as of 3 January 1983
was used in this report.*

The use by the USSR and its allies of lethal and nonlethal chemical warfare (CW) in Afghanistan and Southeast Asia has a foundation in Soviet military doctrine. The USSR for a number of years has envisioned the possible use of such weapons in general or local wars. In addition to its direct military utility in eliminating the resistance of stubborn, highly resilient irregular forces in mountainous or forested areas, the Soviets—and more particularly their Southeast Asian allies—appear to view CW as an instrument of terror designed to eliminate popular support for insurgents. The Soviets apparently have also sought to operationally test and evaluate a variety of old and new chemical agents under various field conditions.

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In providing chemical weapons to their allies and employing them in Afghanistan, the Soviets must have considered the possibility that they would be accused of violating international law, even though the legal aspects of such CW use are ambiguous. But Moscow probably believed that there would not be significant risk of international discovery or outcry. So far, the Soviet leadership apparently has judged the international reaction to the use of chemical weapons to be tolerable and not a reason to change policy. The recent UN report attesting to the existence of circumstantial evidence of CW use may give Moscow more concern, however, because it is the first indication that the US case is beginning to obtain broader acceptance.

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Soviet Motivations for the Use of Chemical Weapons in Afghanistan and Southeast Asia

Chemical Warfare in Soviet Military Doctrine

The use by the USSR and its allies of lethal and nonlethal chemical warfare (CW) in areas such as Afghanistan and Southeast Asia has a foundation in Soviet military doctrine.¹ The Soviets have written extensively about chemical warfare in a NATO-Warsaw Pact context and devote a substantial amount of training to operating in contaminated—nuclear, biological, or chemical—environments. We have long estimated, however, that the presence of nuclear or chemical weapons in the enemy arsenal could give the Soviets pause in initiating chemical attacks. No such deterrent exists with the irregular forces in Southeast Asia or Afghanistan.

have provided for employment of chemical munitions in a number of tactical situations—such as in mountainous and heavily forested areas.

Soviet doctrine also envisions the use of chemical agents in localized conflicts, such as border wars. this doctrine envisages the use, initially, of harassing (irritant) agents, incapacitants such as psychochemicals, and herbicides. During the decisive stage of a local war—and apparently even earlier under certain circumstances—lethal agents also could be employed, even if the enemy had not used them first. In addition to supporting offensive military operations, CW in such a conflict could be used to frustrate or spoil enemy efforts to initiate an offensive.

¹ As used in this paper, the term “chemical warfare” includes the use of mycotoxins.

In countries where chemical weapons have been employed by the Soviets or their allies—Afghanistan, Laos, Kampuchea, and, years ago, Yemen—they were used to eliminate the resistance of stubborn, highly resilient irregular forces located in inaccessible mountainous or jungle terrain.

In addition to its direct military utility, the Soviets—and more particularly their allies—appear to view CW as a terror weapon, relying upon its psychological as well as its physiological impact. Soviet allies have employed CW in an apparent effort to eliminate popular support for insurgents—as well as to eradicate them. In Southeast Asia, for instance, chemical agents frequently are used to contaminate entire villages, including their food and water supply. In addition, the medical symptoms produced by the use of mycotoxins—“yellow rain”—are particularly horrifying and guaranteed to instill fear in villagers who observe them.

Tactical Advantages

The use of a variety of CW agents in a local war also affords a number of tactical advantages. Irritants and incapacitants have been used to render an enemy, well hidden in caves or dense forests, more accessible to conventional weapons or to capture. For instance, Soviet helicopter units in Afghanistan have used chemical agents to dislodge insurgents from caves and then have attacked them with conventional weapons. lethal chemical agents have been used to kill resistance fighters in hiding places which, due to natural terrain and vegetation, are impervious to conventional ordnance.

Chemical attacks frequently have been conducted in lieu of costly ground sweeps in extremely difficult terrain. Such attacks also can deny the insurgents entry into contaminated areas and prevent their return home by poisoning food and water supplies.

Testing and Evaluation

Operational testing and evaluation under various field conditions is another important military rationale for the use of chemical weapons. [redacted]

[redacted] training at the Chemical Defense Academy in Moscow during the 1960s and early 1970s included discussions of US use of irritants, herbicides, and, allegedly, incapacitants, during the Vietnam war. In our judgment, the Soviets may have thought the United States gained valuable experience during these operations. This, in part, may have stimulated their own interest in conducting overseas operational testing of chemical agents. The wide variety of medical symptoms reported in Southeast Asia and Afghanistan suggests that these countries now have become test sites for a broad spectrum of Soviet irritant, incapacitating, and lethal chemical agents—both old and new—as well as delivery vehicles. [redacted]

[redacted] Soviet and Lao medical survey teams have entered contaminated areas after attacks and conducted field examinations of living and dead victims. In at least one case, [redacted] the Soviets removed bodies for further study. Some field examinations may have been conducted to assess levels of toxic contamination before the entry of ground troops. [redacted]

Military Effectiveness

The military results of the use of chemical weapons in Southeast Asia and Afghanistan have varied considerably. In Laos, where aircraft spray poisonous substances on unprotected villagers—routinely including women and children—such use apparently has been quite effective. Thousands of H'mong have been killed, injured, or forced to seek refuge in Thailand. In Kampuchea, where the attacks in large part have been conducted by artillery in support of ground troop operations against better protected guerrilla fighters, the effectiveness has been substantially less. [redacted]

In Afghanistan, where Soviet forces have at their disposal a broad range of modern weaponry, the use of lethal and nonlethal chemical weapons seems to be much more limited and selective than in Southeast Asia. In addition, the effectiveness of such use has been even lower than in Kampuchea. This may be because the Mujahedin normally are well hidden and

have begun employing crude methods of protecting themselves from inhaling gas vapors, and because weather and geographic conditions are extremely difficult. [redacted]

Political Calculations

In providing their Vietnamese and Laotian allies with a chemical weapons capability and in undertaking some lethal chemical operations in Afghanistan themselves, the Soviets must have considered the possibility that they would be accused of violating the relevant international accords, even though the legal aspects of CW use are ambiguous (see appendix). We doubt, however, that the Soviets believed there would be significant risk of international discovery. They probably anticipated that documenting the use of chemical weapons in the Third World would be difficult—the areas where they have been used are remote and the substances generally dissipate rapidly. In addition, Moscow and its allies could try to thwart detection efforts—as they have by making it difficult for UN observers to gain access to Afghanistan, Kampuchea, and Laos. Furthermore, the Soviets probably initially doubted that anyone would take an interest in such obscure people as the H'mong or the remnants of the stigmatized Pol Pot regime. [redacted]

The continuing use of chemical weapons in Southeast Asia and Afghanistan indicates that, so far, Moscow has judged the international reaction to their use to be more an irritant than a reason to change policy. The Soviets probably thought that initial US charges of employment of such weapons could be brushed away as part of US efforts to discredit the USSR. They probably judged that propaganda on such US actions as the use of chemical weapons in Vietnam and the decision to undertake a binary CW program could be used to counter the US charges. The failure of all but a few close US allies to publicly endorse the US charges and the initial UN investigation's equivocation on the issue probably reinforced these judgments. The recent UN report attesting to the existence of circumstantial evidence of CW use may give Moscow more concern, however, because it is the first good indication that the US case is obtaining broader acceptance. [redacted]

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Appendix

Legal Issues Associated With the Use of Chemical Agents and Mycotoxins

The 1925 Geneva Protocol bans the use in war of chemical (and bacteriological) weapons.² Although the USSR ratified the treaty in 1928 and Vietnam did so in 1980, Afghanistan, Laos, and Kampuchea have not signed it. By its own language, the Protocol only applies between signatory parties. Many countries—including the USSR and Vietnam—have made reservations reiterating that they are not bound with respect to countries that did not sign the Protocol. Therefore, the Protocol itself would not apply to Soviet or Vietnamese use of chemical weapons in Afghanistan, Kampuchea, or Laos. Neither the possession nor transfer of chemical weapons, nor assistance to other countries in their acquisition, are violations of the Protocol in the absence of involvement in the use of such weapons. The Protocol, however, has become international custom among civilized nations. That custom, at least, would be “violated” by the use of lethal chemical weapons or assistance in such use.

The US position is that the use of mycotoxins in Southeast Asia and Afghanistan clearly violates the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention. This agreement, to which the USSR, Vietnam, Laos, and Afghanistan are parties, prohibits the development, production, stockpiling, acquisition, and retention of biological agents or toxins. It also bans weapons and equipment to deliver such substances. Additionally, the convention prohibits the transfer of such items “to any recipient whatsoever, directly or indirectly,” and prohibits assistance to any state in manufacturing or acquiring them.

² The United States holds that the treaty covers only the use of lethal weapons, not such substances as irritants and incapacitants.

The Soviets deny using mycotoxins but assert that these substances—whether produced synthetically or by biological organisms—are not living and hence are chemicals. They say they should be classified as chemical warfare agents. The US position, however, is that all toxins, whether natural or synthetic, are prohibited by the agreement.



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